



Narrative Identity and Well-Being in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Developmental Review

Ergenlik ve Beliren Yetişkinlikte Anlatı Kimliği ve İyi Oluş: Gelişimsel Bir Derleme

ABSTRACT

Narrative identity refers to the dynamic life story through which individuals integrate past experiences, present self-understanding, and future expectations into a coherent sense of self. Although narrative identity is shown to be consistently associated with psychological well-being in adulthood, its role during adolescence and emerging adulthood has received relatively less attention. The present review examines the development of narrative identity across adolescence and emerging adulthood and synthesizes research investigating its associations with well-being during these periods. First, the review outlines the developmental foundations of narrative identity. Second, major characteristics of narrative identity are discussed, with particular emphasis on affective and motivational themes, autobiographical reasoning, and structural coherence. Third, the review evaluates evidence linking these narrative processes to well-being. The literature indicates that narrative identity functions as an important mechanism by which adolescents and emerging adults organize and derive meaning from past experiences and maintain a sense of self-continuity across time. However, the associations between narrative identity processes and well-being appear to vary by age. Whereas narrative identity characteristics are generally associated with positive psychological outcomes in adulthood, markers of autobiographical reasoning during early adolescence may sometimes coincide with psychological distress, becoming more adaptive later in development. Overall, literature emphasizes narrative identity as a dynamic developmental process that contributes to both identity formation and well-being across the transition to adulthood. Implications for future longitudinal research and narrative-based interventions are discussed.

Keywords: Narrative identity, Well-being, Adolescence, Emerging adulthood, Autobiographical reasoning, narrative coherence.

ÖZET

Anlatı kimliği, bireylerin geçmiş deneyimlerini, mevcut benlik anlayışlarını ve geleceğe ilişkin beklentilerini bütünlükten tutarlı bir benlik algısı oluşturdukları dinamik yaşam öyküsünü ifade eder. Anlatı kimliğinin yetişkinlik döneminde psikolojik iyi oluş ile tutarlı biçimde ilişkili olduğu gösterilmiş olsa da, ergenlik ve beliren yetişkinlik dönemlerindeki rolü görece daha az incelenmiştir. Bu derleme, ergenlik ve beliren yetişkinlik boyunca anlatı kimliğinin gelişimini ele almakta ve bu dönemlerde anlatı kimliği ile iyi oluş arasındaki ilişkileri inceleyen araştırmaları sentezlemektedir. Derleme ilk olarak, anlatı kimliğinin gelişimsel temellerini ortaya koymaktadır. İkinci olarak, anlatı kimliğinin başlıca özellikleri ele alınmakta; özellikle duygusal ve motivasyonel temalar, otobiyografik akıl yürütme ve anlatı tutarlılığı üzerinde durulmaktadır. Üçüncü olarak ise bu anlatsal süreçlerle iyi oluş arasındaki ilişkiye dair bulgular değerlendirilmektedir. Alanyazın, anlatı kimliğinin ergenlerin ve beliren yetişkinlerin geçmiş deneyimlerini düzenlemelerine, bu deneyimlerden anlam çıkarmalarına ve zaman içinde benlik sürekliliğini korumalarına yardımcı olan önemli bir mekanizma olduğunu göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, anlatı kimliği süreçleri ile iyi oluş arasındaki ilişkilerin yaşa göre farklılık gösterebildiği görülmektedir. Yetişkinlikte anlatı kimliğinin özellikleri genel olarak olumlu psikolojik çıktılarla ilişkiliyken, erken ergenlik dönemindeki otobiyografik akıl yürütme göstergeleri zaman zaman psikolojik stresle birlikte ortaya çıkabilmekte, ancak gelişimin ilerleyen dönemlerinde daha uyumlu işlevler kazanabilmektedir. Genel olarak alanyazın, anlatı kimliğini yetişkinliğe geçiş sürecinde hem kimlik oluşumuna hem de iyi oluşa katkıda bulunan dinamik bir gelişimsel süreç olarak vurgulamaktadır. Son olarak, gelecekte yürütülecek boylamsal araştırmalar ve anlatı temelli müdahaleler açısından çıkarımlar tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Anlatı kimliği, İyi oluş, Ergenlik, Beliren yetişkinlik, Otobiyografik akıl yürütme, Anlatı tutarlılığı

INTRODUCTION

Well-being is broadly conceptualized as optimal human functioning and reflects the extent to which individuals experience their lives as satisfying, meaningful, and psychologically fulfilling (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Contemporary perspectives suggest that well-being encompasses both how individuals feel about their lives and how effectively they function within them. Accordingly, well-being is increasingly viewed as a multidimensional construct that

Yağmur İlgin¹

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¹ PhD, Monitoring and Evaluation Expert, Turkish Red Crescent, Ankara, Türkiye. ORCID: 0000-0002-7363-6654

includes emotional experiences, evaluations concerning life satisfaction, and perceptions of meaning, purpose, and personal growth (Diener et al., 1999; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Among the psychological processes that contribute to well-being, narrative identity has received increasing attention (Adler et al., 2012). Narrative identity refers to the internalized and evolving life story through which individuals integrate past experiences, present self-understandings, and anticipated futures into a coherent sense of self (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Through narrative identity, individuals construct meaning from life experiences, establish continuity across time, and develop an understanding of who they are and who they may become (McAdams, 2008). Because these processes involve meaning-making and self-understanding, narrative identity appears particularly relevant to eudaimonic well-being (Bauer et al., 2008; McAdams & McLean, 2013). At the same time, narrative identity may also contribute to hedonic well-being by shaping how individuals emotionally interpret and reconstruct past experiences, thereby influencing affective experiences and life satisfaction (Adler, 2019).

A growing body of research demonstrates that narrative identity is associated with a range of well-being indicators across adulthood. Individuals who construct coherent, meaningful, and growth-oriented narratives generally report higher levels of psychological adjustment, life satisfaction, and personal growth (Adler et al., 2016). However, narrative identity is not a static characteristic. Rather, it develops gradually through interactions among cognitive, emotional, and social processes that unfold across development (Adler, 2019). Consequently, understanding how narrative identity relates to well-being requires attention to the developmental contexts in which life stories emerge.

The development of narrative identity becomes especially important during adolescence and emerging adulthood, periods characterized by extensive identity exploration and increasing efforts to establish a coherent sense of self (Erikson, 1968; McLean et al., 2010). During these years, individuals actively engage with questions concerning who they are, how they have changed, and what kind of future they envision for themselves (McLean & Lilgendahl, 2019). Narrative approaches extend traditional identity theories by emphasizing how young people organize autobiographical experiences into broader life stories that provide continuity, coherence, and meaning across time (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Importantly, developmental research suggests that narrative processes may function differently across age periods. Whereas sophisticated autobiographical reasoning and meaning-making are generally associated with positive adjustment in adulthood, the same processes may sometimes coincide with distress during earlier stages of adolescence, when narrative identity is still developing (Chen et al., 2012; Reese et al., 2017).

Given these developmental considerations, examining narrative identity from a developmental perspective is essential for understanding its role in well-being. Although substantial evidence has documented associations between narrative identity and well-being in adulthood, less attention has been devoted to how these associations emerge and change across adolescence and emerging adulthood (Chen et al., 2012; Reese et al., 2017). Therefore, the present review examines the development of narrative identity across adolescence and emerging adulthood and synthesizes research investigating how key narrative processes are associated with well-being during these developmental periods. Particular attention is given to the main characteristics of narrative identity, namely affective and motivational themes, autobiographical reasoning, and narrative coherence, as well as to age-related differences in their associations with well-being.

WELL-BEING

Well-being is a complex and multidimensional concept that is commonly understood through two major aspects: hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, which are often referred to as subjective well-being and psychological well-being, respectively (Diener, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Drawing on the hedonic aspect, subjective well-being consists of both affective and cognitive components (Diener, 1984). The affective component concerns emotional experiences, involving the presence of positive affect and the absence of negative affect, whereas the cognitive component reflects individuals' evaluations of their lives, typically operationalized as life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985). In contrast, building on the eudaimonic aspect, psychological well-being, emphasizes positive functioning and self-realization. This perspective encompasses dimensions such as autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, meaningful interpersonal relationships, personal growth, and a sense of purpose in life (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Contemporary theories of well-being acknowledge that these hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions are closely interconnected, highlighting the importance of both positive subjective experiences and the psychological capacities that enable individuals to lead fulfilling lives (Fosco, 2022). Although these traditions emerged from different theoretical backgrounds, recent research suggests that hedonic and eudaimonic well-being are closely

related and represent complementary dimensions of broader human flourishing rather than mutually exclusive psychological constructs (Arslan & Coşkun, 2026; Disabato et al., 2016).

Beyond these two dominant perspectives, scholars have proposed additional frameworks that conceptualize well-being through related constructs such as wellness (Harari et al., 2005), quality of life (Cooke et al., 2016), physical health, and general happiness (Zhang et al., 2024). As a result, no single definition of well-being has achieved universal acceptance. Nevertheless, the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing remains the most influential and widely adopted framework within psychological research (Budler, 2025; Seligman, 2011). Building on this framework, the current study approaches the relations between narrative identity and well-being from the hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of well-being.

DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND LIFE STORY NARRATIVES

Narrative identity is situated within multidimensional models of personality in which dispositional traits, goals and values, and life stories reflect related but distinct layers of personality functioning (McAdams & Olson, 2009). Within these models, narrative identity represents the most integrative level of personality because it involves a dynamic life story that individuals construct to connect their past, present, and future (McAdams, 2015). Whereas personality traits describe relatively stable patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving, and goals and values reflect motivational orientations, narrative identity provides a broader interpretive framework by which individuals explain how their experiences are connected and what those experiences tell about the self (Adler, 2019; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Through this process, individuals organize life experiences into a coherent account of self while also constructing meaning in their lives (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Thus, life stories are not mere collections of autobiographical memories but interpretive narratives that help individuals understand who they are, how they became that person, and who they may become in the future (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Although narrative identity becomes especially important during adolescence and emerging adulthood, its developmental foundations are rooted in the early years of life. One of the preliminary prerequisites is the development of autobiographical memory during the first years of life, when children gradually recognize personal experiences as events that happened to them (Reese & Fivush, 1993). The development of autobiographical memory occurs within social interactions, particularly through memory conversations with caregivers about shared and unshared past experiences (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). During these interactions, parents encourage children to recall details of past events, elaborate on experiences, and discuss emotions and interpretations related to those events. A strong line of research has shown that parents' reminiscing styles contribute to later individual differences in children's autobiographical memory skills and narrative abilities while also shaping children's understanding of which experiences are meaningful, socially appropriate, and worthwhile to share (Alkis et al., 2024; Fivush, 2019; Fivush et al., 2018). Importantly, these conversational environments are shaped by both gender and culture. Cross-cultural work suggests that highly elaborative reminiscing is more common in Western middle-class families (Fivush, 2007; Schröder et al., 2013), often tied to cultural self-construal orientation emphasizing individuation, and (Alkis et al., 2024; Sahin-Acar & Leichtman, 2015) and socialization goals emphasizing autonomy and self-expression (Schröder et al., 2013). At the same time, relevant studies show that parents tend to be more elaborative with daughters than with sons, particularly when discussing emotional experiences, although the strength of these gender differences varies across cultural settings (Fivush et al., 2000; Reese & Fivush, 1993). These patterns indicate that opportunities to practice elaborative, emotion-rich narration are not equally distributed, which may help explain gendered and cultural differences in later narrative identity and its links to well-being.

Another important developmental achievement is the advancement in theory of mind around the ages of three to four. At this stage, children increasingly understand that people can have different thoughts, beliefs, and desires, and they gradually incorporate these perspectives into conversations about past experiences (Welch-Ross, 1997). As children become more capable of understanding the mental states of others, they also become better able to discuss motivations, emotions, and perspectives within memory conversations. This growing social-cognitive understanding contributes to the development of broader event scripts and more elaborated representations of repeated past experiences rather than isolated autobiographical episodes (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Around the ages of five and six, children also develop a basic understanding of culturally typical narrative structure, organizing stories chronologically and including elements such as an initiating event, a problem, and some form of resolution (Hill et al., 2025).

During late childhood and early adolescence, narratives become increasingly sophisticated and interpretive. Children and young adolescents show greater attention to causal explanations and increasingly attempt to explain why events happened and how experiences are connected (Reese et al., 2010). By approximately nine to 11 years

of age, their ability to organize events temporally resembles that of adults, and they become increasingly capable of constructing causal links between events and between experiences and the self (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Köber & Habermas, 2017). At the same time, young people increasingly draw upon culturally shared life scripts, or normative expectations regarding the timing and sequencing of important life events, when organizing narratives about lives and development (Bohn & Berntsen, 2008). As a result, children and adolescents gradually acquire a broader understanding of how lives are typically structured within their culture, including expectations regarding major developmental transitions and socially valued life pathways (McAdams, 2015).

Despite these improvements, early adolescents are generally still in the early stages of constructing an integrated life story that connects different aspects of the self into a coherent whole (Köber et al., 2015). The development of a consolidated life story depends on several cognitive and social advances that continue maturing across adolescence, including autobiographical reasoning, causal thinking, and the ability to integrate personal experiences within culturally appropriate frameworks (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Bohn & Berntsen, 2008). As they age, adolescents increasingly recognize recurring patterns across experiences and become more capable of explaining how significant events contribute to their identity over time. These abilities are especially important because they provide the foundation for constructing coherent and meaningful narratives that are closely associated with psychological well-being (Adler et al., 2016).

Late adolescence and emerging adulthood are particularly important periods for narrative identity development because during these years individuals are expected to make enduring decisions regarding education, work, interpersonal relationships, and future goals (Arnett, 2015). These societal demands encourage greater autobiographical reasoning as young people attempt to construct a sense of continuity and direction across time (McAdams, 2013). Unlike younger children, who are rarely expected to define long-term identities or future pathways, late adolescents and emerging adults are often asked to explain who they are becoming and what kind of future they hope for themselves (Luyckx et al., 2025). Everyday social interactions may also reinforce broader cultural expectations regarding what constitutes a successful, meaningful, or desirable life (Fivush, 2010; Thorne & McLean, 2003). Consequently, narrative identity development occurs not only through individual reflection but also through ongoing engagement with cultural narratives and socially shared expectations that young people may adopt, negotiate, or reject (Fivush et al., 2011).

Life stories are often assessed with McAdams's Life Story Interview, a semi-structured interview that asks individuals to organize their lives into chapters and describe important scenes such as high-, low-, and turning-points (McAdams, 2008). Providing coherent responses to these prompts requires advanced autobiographical reasoning, familiarity with culturally shared narrative forms, and the ability to interpret personal experiences (McLean & Lilgendahl, 2019). Thus, although the foundations of narrative identity emerge in childhood and become increasingly visible during adolescence, fully integrated and coherent life stories are more commonly observed in adulthood, when identity processes are typically more mature and consolidated (Fivush et al., 2017).

Taken together, narrative identity reflects development over the life course. Across adolescence and emerging adulthood, developmental improvements increasingly enable individuals to construct coherent and meaningful life stories that provide self-continuity, meaning, and purpose.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY

The scientific study of narrative identity is grounded in the stories individuals tell about themselves, both reflecting and shaping their sense of identity across time (McAdams, 2001; McLean et al., 2020). Through autobiographical narratives, individuals organize experiences into a broader understanding of who they are, how they have changed, and how different life events are connected within a continuous sense of self. Accordingly, narrative identity research focuses not simply on what people experience, but on how they interpret, organize, and communicate those experiences through these stories (McLean et al., 2007).

To examine narrative identity empirically, researchers commonly analyze narratives about personally significant experiences, including high points, low points, and major turning points in life (Bluck, 2001; Bluck & Habermas, 2001). Constructing narratives about such experiences involves more than remembering events; it requires individuals to interpret their significance, connect them to broader understandings of the self, and continuously revise these interpretations as new experiences emerge (Fivush et al., 2017). Consequently, the psychological importance of a narrative often lies in the meaning individuals assign to it and the way it is integrated into their broader life story (Fivush, 2001). For this reason, narrative identity researchers are particularly interested in identifying narrative features that help explain individual differences in adjustment, identity development, and well-being (Adler, 2019; Adler et al., 2016).

In their influential framework describing the empirical structure of narrative identity, McLean and colleagues (2020) proposed three broad dimensions of life story narratives that are especially relevant to psychological functioning: affective and motivational themes, autobiographical reasoning, and structural elements. Together, these dimensions capture how individuals emotionally experience life events, derive meaning from them, and organize them into coherent narratives.

Affective and Motivational Themes

Affective and motivational themes represent central dimensions through which individuals make sense of their experiences and communicate important aspects of the self (McLean et al., 2020). The affective dimension concerns the emotional qualities of narratives, including both the overall emotional tone of a story and the emotional transitions that occur throughout it. Two commonly studied affective coding units are redemption and contamination sequences. Redemption involves a change from negative emotional tone toward positive outcomes or emotional resolution, whereas contamination within a narrative describes a shift from positive emotional tone to negative (Dunlop et al., 2020; McAdams & Bowman, 2001). These emotional patterns are considered especially important because they reflect broader ways of understanding important life events.

In addition, narratives also express motivational concerns that reflect what individuals value and search for in life. Two of the most extensively studied motivational themes are agency and communion. Agency refers to themes emphasizing autonomy, achievement, mastery, and the capacity to influence one's own life, whereas communion involves themes centered on intimacy, relationships, belonging, and connection with others (Bakan, 1966; McAdams et al., 1996). The relative emphasis individuals place on agency and communion within their narratives provides insight into the motivational priorities shaping their identity and interpersonal relationships. Together, affective and motivational themes illuminate both the emotional meaning individuals assign to experiences and the broader personal concerns that motivate their lives (McLean et al., 2020). These themes are also theoretically relevant to well-being. Agency narratives may contribute to well-being by fostering perceptions of competence, autonomy, and personal effectiveness, all of which are central components of positive psychological functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Communion narratives, in turn, may support well-being by reinforcing feelings of belongingness, social connectedness, and relationship quality. Likewise, redemption sequences may promote both hedonic well-being through increased positive affect and eudaimonic well-being through the construction of meaning and growth from adversity. In contrast, contamination sequences may undermine well-being by emphasizing loss, disappointment, or deterioration in the self and the social world.

Autobiographical Reasoning

Another important characteristic of narrative identity is autobiographical reasoning, which refers to the processes through which individuals interpret experiences and connect them to their broader sense of self (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas, 2011). Autobiographical reasoning enables people to move beyond simply describing events by reflecting on why experiences occurred, what they reveal about the self, and how they contribute to personal continuity or change over time (Pasupathi et al., 2007). These processes include meaning-making, reflective thinking, drawing causal connections between events, and linking experiences across different periods of life. Through autobiographical reasoning, individuals attempt to create a coherent understanding of how life experiences fit together within an ongoing personal narrative (McLean et al., 2020).

The broader function of autobiographical reasoning is closely tied to maintaining a sense of continuity of self over time and understanding the personal significance of major life experiences (Habermas & Köber, 2015a, 2015b). However, individuals differ substantially in how they use autobiographical reasoning. While some individuals use an assimilative approach, incorporating new experiences into existing understandings of the self, others adopt a more accommodative approach that involves revising or reorganizing existing self-narratives in response to important experiences (McLean, 2008). Importantly, experiences do not automatically become integrated into narrative identity simply because they occurred. Rather, integration depends on individuals' ability to derive meaning from those experiences and connect them to broader understandings of themselves and their lives (McLean et al., 2020). Because autobiographical reasoning enables individuals to interpret life experiences within a broader self-framework, it is often considered a key mechanism linking narrative identity to well-being. Through meaning-making and self-event connections, individuals can maintain a sense of continuity across time, understand personal change, and derive purpose from challenging experiences. These functions may be particularly relevant to eudaimonic well-being, which emphasizes personal growth, self-acceptance, and meaning in life.

Structural Elements

Additionally, narrative identity research also examines the structural organization of narratives. Structural elements refer to how stories are organized and communicated, including the order of events, contextual and temporal information, and the amount and complexity of detail provided within the narrative (McLean et al., 2020). These organizational features are commonly examined under the broader concept of narrative coherence (Waters & Fivush, 2015).

Narrative coherence is conceptualized as the structural framework that allows listeners or readers to understand how events unfold and how different parts of the story are connected (Reese et al., 2011). Unlike affective themes or autobiographical reasoning, which emphasize emotional meaning and self-interpretation, structural coherence focuses more directly on the organization and clarity of the narrative itself (McLean et al., 2020). Coherent narratives typically include clear temporal sequencing, contextual information, and meaningful connections between events, enabling experiences to be understood as part of an organized and continuous life story (Reese et al., 2011). Because coherent narratives support a stable and comprehensible sense of self across time, narrative coherence has become one of the widely studied markers of narrative identity development and psychological well-being. From a well-being perspective, coherent narratives may reduce uncertainty regarding personal experiences and facilitate a clearer understanding of how life events fit together within the broader life story. This organized representation of the self may strengthen feelings of self-continuity and predictability, thereby supporting both life satisfaction and psychological adjustment.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND WELL-BEING

Because narrative identity helps individuals organize experiences into coherent understandings of the self, researchers have increasingly examined which narrative characteristics are most strongly associated with psychological well-being (Adler et al., 2016). A central question within this literature concerns whether certain ways of narrating life experiences contribute to better psychological adjustment beyond the influence of demographic characteristics or dispositional personality traits. Since well-being encompasses both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions, narrative identity may contribute to these aspects through partially distinct mechanisms. Narrative features that shape emotional evaluations of past experiences, such as redemption and contamination sequences, may be particularly relevant to hedonic well-being because they influence positive and negative affect as well as overall life satisfaction. In contrast, autobiographical reasoning, meaning-making, and coherent life-story construction may be more closely linked to eudaimonic well-being by supporting purpose in life, self-understanding, identity integration, and personal growth. Although these distinctions are conceptually useful, the two dimensions of well-being are closely intertwined, and narrative identity processes might contribute to both simultaneously.

In this regard, this section first summarizes key findings on links between narrative identity and well-being in adulthood, which provide a developmental baseline for interpreting similar processes in adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Narrative Identity and Well-Being in Adulthood

Adler and colleagues (2016) conducted a comprehensive review of studies examining links between narrative identity and well-being across adulthood. Their findings demonstrated that several characteristics of narrative identity are uniquely associated with psychological well-being even after accounting for demographic variables and broad personality traits, especially in adulthood. These findings suggest that the ways individuals interpret, organize, and emotionally evaluate their experiences provide important insight into well-being beyond traditional personality measures (Adler, 2019).

Within this adult literature, research consistently demonstrates that affective and motivational themes are strongly related to psychological well-being (Adler et al., 2016). Motivational themes reflecting agency and communion appear particularly important because they provide individuals with a sense of purpose, connection, and direction in life. At the same time, affective patterns reveal how individuals emotionally process the highs and lows of life (McLean et al., 2020). Narratives characterized by redemption sequences and themes of agency and communion are generally associated with higher levels of psychological adjustment, resilience, and life satisfaction (Adler et al., 2008a; Bauer & McAdams, 2004, 2010). In contrast, contamination sequences, in which positive experiences become emotionally negative over the course of the story, are often associated with poorer psychological functioning and lower well-being (Adler et al., 2006; McAdams et al., 2001). Collectively, these findings indicate that both the emotional tone of narratives and the motivational concerns embedded within them contribute meaningfully to how individuals maintain continuity, purpose, and psychological well-being across adulthood.

Autobiographical reasoning² has also emerged as an important predictor of psychological well-being. Importantly, different forms of autobiographical reasoning appear to support different dimensions of well-being (Adler, 2019). Narratives that assimilate experiences into existing understandings of the self are more strongly associated with hedonic well-being, including greater positive affect and lower levels of negative affect (Adler & Poulin, 2009; Cox & McAdams, 2014). In contrast, accommodative forms of autobiographical reasoning, which involve revising or transforming existing self-understandings in response to important life experiences, are more consistently linked to eudaimonic well-being, such as personal growth, maturity, and meaning in life (King & Raspin, 2004; Lilgendahl et al., 2013; Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011). These findings suggest that narrative identity contributes to well-being not only by helping individuals preserve a stable sense of self, but also by supporting psychological growth and adaptation in response to changing life circumstances.

Structural characteristics of narratives have likewise been associated with psychological well-being. Existing research nevertheless suggests that greater narrative coherence is positively related to well-being and psychological adjustment (Adler et al., 2007; Adler et al., 2008a). Coherent narratives may support well-being because they enable individuals to organize experiences into understandable and continuous accounts of the self, thereby reducing confusion and strengthening feelings of continuity across time. Thus, the ability to construct organized and comprehensible narratives appears to represent another important pathway through which narrative identity contributes to psychological functioning (Reese et al., 2011).

Narrative Identity and Well-Being in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood

Although narrative identity is often associated with psychological well-being in adulthood, these associations become more complex during adolescence and emerging adulthood. As young people gradually acquire the cognitive, emotional, and social capacities necessary to construct extended life stories, the ways they interpret and organize experiences become increasingly relevant to psychological adjustment (Habermas & Reese, 2015). During this developmental period, adolescents move beyond simply recalling events and increasingly attempt to explain how experiences shaped them, why those experiences matter, and how they connect to broader understandings of the self and future life trajectories (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). However, because the capacities required for sophisticated autobiographical reasoning are still developing, narrative processes that are generally adaptive in adulthood may function differently earlier in development (Chen et al., 2012; Reese et al., 2017). Consequently, narrative identity during adolescence and emerging adulthood may simultaneously support identity development while also creating short-term emotional challenges as young people struggle to interpret complex or emotionally difficult experiences (McLean et al., 2010).

Research suggests that highly sophisticated autobiographical reasoning does not always correspond to better well-being during adolescence. Chen and colleagues (2012), for example, examined adolescents' high-point and low-point narratives across dimensions such as thematic coherence, meaning-making, and developmental consequentiality. Their findings indicated that higher levels of narrative organization were not consistently associated with greater well-being or fewer behavioral difficulties. In low-point narratives, explicitly describing how difficult experiences produced internal personal change was marginally associated with lower global well-being. Similarly, among boys, higher thematic coherence in high-point narratives predicted lower psychological well-being. These findings might suggest that adolescents' growing ability to construct highly analytical and self-reflective narratives may temporarily exceed their current cognitive capacity to fully process and integrate the implications of difficult experiences. As a result, advanced autobiographical reasoning during early adolescence may sometimes contribute to rumination or emotional distress rather than immediate psychological benefits.

Similar developmental patterns were observed in research conducted by Reese and colleagues (2017), who examined causal coherence among adolescents and emerging adults from diverse cultural backgrounds in New Zealand. Their findings demonstrated that the relationship between autobiographical reasoning and well-being differed substantially by age. Whereas causal coherence predicted higher life satisfaction among emerging adults aged 18 to 21, it was associated with lower life satisfaction among early adolescents aged 12 to 14. Rather than suggesting that autobiographical reasoning is inherently maladaptive during adolescence, these findings may indicate that younger adolescents often engage in meaning-making processes while actively coping with emotional distress and developmental uncertainty. In this sense, autobiographical reasoning may initially emerge as an effort to understand difficult emotions before it later becomes a more stable resource for psychological well-being.

² This category, termed integrative meaning by Adler and colleagues (2016), refers to narrative elements in which individuals interpret their experiences and connect them to their evolving sense of self. For the sake of the current review, and in line with the terminology used by McLean et al. (2020), this category is referred to as autobiographical reasoning.

Further evidence for developmental differences in narrative processing comes from research examining adolescent boys' narratives about high points, low points, turning points, and continuity memories (McLean et al., 2010). Using indicators of self-esteem and depressive symptoms, the study revealed that different forms of meaning-making were associated with well-being in distinct ways. Narratives emphasizing explicit connections between experiences and personal growth were positively associated with well-being across adolescence. In contrast, more sophisticated and abstract forms of meaning-making were associated with lower well-being among younger boys, although this negative association disappeared by late adolescence. These findings highlight an important developmental distinction between recognizing personal growth and engaging in highly abstract narrative engagement. Whereas identifying growth and continuity may support psychological adjustment relatively early, more complex interpretive processing may become beneficial only after adolescents develop stronger emotional and cognitive capacities for integrating ambiguous or conflicting self-knowledge.

Although advanced autobiographical reasoning may not always immediately benefit adolescents' internal well-being, it appears to support interpersonal adjustment earlier in development. Beyond promoting self-understanding, coherent autobiographical reasoning may facilitate empathy, perspective-taking, and social integration. For example, Chen and colleagues (2012) found that adolescents who demonstrated higher developmental consequentiality in low-point narratives also reported higher levels of prosocial behavior, particularly during late adolescence. Thus, even when meaning-making processes temporarily coincide with emotional distress, they may simultaneously contribute to important social and interpersonal competencies that support later adjustment during the transition to adulthood.

As individuals transition into emerging adulthood, the psychological benefits of advanced autobiographical reasoning become more consistently evident. Nevertheless, the adaptiveness of narrative processing continues to depend on the specific meanings individuals derive from experiences. Banks and Salmon (2013) examined how emerging adults constructed self-event connections and meaning from high-point and low-point experiences. Their findings suggested that highly analytical autobiographical reasoning was not always beneficial. Rather, the effects depended largely on whether individuals connected experiences to positive or negative understandings of the self. Among emerging adults who frequently linked low-point experiences to negative self-attributes, greater meaning-making and more sophisticated autobiographical reasoning were associated with higher levels of psychopathology. However, when individuals constructed positive self-event connections within narratives about adversity, the negative association between difficult life events and psychological adjustment was substantially reduced. These findings indicate that autobiographical reasoning in emerging adulthood becomes psychologically beneficial primarily when individuals are able to integrate difficult experiences into constructive and adaptive understandings of the self.

Research on narrative identity in emerging adulthood has also expanded beyond personal memories to include vicarious narratives, particularly stories transmitted across generations within families. Merrill and colleagues (2017) examined how emerging adults narrated both their own experiences and stories about important experiences from their parents' lives. These narratives were coded for interpretive features such as cognitive processing, evaluative language, and perspective-taking. Their findings revealed gender-specific associations between narrative processing and well-being. Both young men and women reported higher well-being when they demonstrated deeper cognitive engagement while narrating stories about their same-gender parent. However, the specific narrative themes associated with well-being differed by gender. For women, cognitive processing of maternal transgression narratives was particularly associated with higher well-being, whereas for men, well-being was more strongly linked to cognitive processing of paternal pride narratives. These findings suggest that emerging adults may draw upon different intergenerational narrative models when constructing identity and maintaining psychological well-being. More broadly, they highlight that narrative identity development during emerging adulthood occurs not only through reflection on personal experiences but also through engagement with family narratives and socially shared understandings of the self.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The evidence reviewed on narrative identity development and well-being in adolescence and emerging adulthood carries several implications for research and applied developmental work. First, the findings support the idea that narrative identity is a gradually developing system that integrates cognitive, emotional, and social capacities from early years of life to adulthood (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Habermas & Bluck, 2000). This developmental perspective implies that associations between narrative features and well-being must be interpreted in age-sensitive ways, rather than assuming that narrative processes have uniform psychological consequences across development (Reese et al., 2017).

From a research perspective, a key implication is the need for longitudinal and process-oriented designs that can capture how narrative identity and well-being mutually shape one another over time. The majority of the existing studies are based on cross-sectional findings, which limits conclusions about directionality. Future studies should examine how early forms of autobiographical reasoning, narrative coherence, and emotional meaning-making evolve into more integrated life stories and how these developmental trajectories predict later psychological adjustment (McLean et al., 2020; Reese et al., 2017). Such designs would also clarify whether early narrative complexity is a precursor to later well-being. Another important direction for future research concerns the examination of narrative identity across diverse cultural and social contexts. Most evidence on narrative identity and well-being has been generated in Western and relatively individualistic societies, limiting understanding of how narrative processes operate in cultures that place greater emphasis on relational selves, family obligations, and collective identities. Future studies should examine whether narrative characteristics such as agency, communion, autobiographical reasoning, and coherence demonstrate similar developmental trajectories and associations with well-being across cultural contexts. In addition, greater attention should be devoted to underrepresented populations, including ethnic minority youth, migrants, refugees, and socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescents, whose identity development may be shaped by unique developmental challenges and sociocultural experiences.

Second, the literature suggests that the adaptiveness of narrative processes is highly contingent on developmental timing and narrative form. For example, autobiographical reasoning and narrative sophistication appear to support well-being more consistently in late adolescents and emerging adulthood than in early adolescence (Chen et al., 2012; McLean et al., 2010). This developmental nuance highlights the importance of distinguishing between early-emerging narrative skills and fully integrated narrative identity, both conceptually and methodologically. Thus researchers should avoid assuming that more complex narratives are more adaptive and instead consider developmental stage, age, and cognitive and emotional capacities as moderating factors.

In terms of applied implications, developmental variability in narrative processes suggests that narrative-based interventions should be tailored to adolescents' cognitive and emotional capacities. Research indicates that autobiographical reasoning and coherent life-story construction continue to develop throughout adolescence and depend partly on social scaffolding processes, particularly supportive conversations with parents and peers (Habermas & Reese, 2015; McLean & Mansfield, 2012). Accordingly, interventions during adolescence may benefit from emphasizing guided meaning-making, emotional labeling, and structured autobiographical reflection rather than encouraging highly abstract or intensive self-analysis prematurely. This perspective is also consistent with findings showing that highly sophisticated meaning-making and narrative complexity may sometimes coincide with distress or rumination among younger adolescents who may not yet possess the developmental resources necessary to fully integrate emotionally difficult experiences (Chen et al., 2012; McLean et al., 2010). Thus, narrative interventions may be most effective when they provide age-appropriate scaffolding that helps adolescents gradually organize and interpret personal experiences in coherent and emotionally manageable ways.

Finally, the reviewed literature suggests important implications for family- and context-based approaches to narrative identity development. Given the role of early memory conversations with parents in shaping autobiographical memory and narrative skills, parent-child reminiscing practices may represent a meaningful target for early preventive work (Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Fivush, 2019). Encouraging elaborative, emotionally supportive, and meaning-oriented conversations about past experiences may help lay the groundwork for later narrative identity development and its associations with well-being.

Overall, narrative identity research underscores that well-being is not only influenced by what individuals experience, but also by how they come to understand, structure, and integrate those experiences into a coherent life story that evolves across development.

CONCLUSION

Narrative identity is an important developmental process by which adolescents and emerging adults construct a coherent understanding of themselves across time (McLean & Lilgendahl, 2019). Building on earlier social interactions with parents about past experiences and cognitive maturation, young people gradually become capable of integrating experiences into broader life stories that provide continuity, meaning, and direction (Adler, 2019). Across the literature reviewed, narrative identity emerges not only as a reflection of developmental change but also as an active mechanism through which individuals interpret experiences, navigate identity-related challenges, and maintain psychological well-being (McLean et al., 2020).

The articles reviewed in this work demonstrate that fundamental characteristics of narrative identity, including affective and motivational themes, autobiographical reasoning, and narrative coherence, are highly related to

psychological adjustment. Narratives characterized by agency, communion, redemption, and coherent organization are generally linked to better well-being; whereas contamination themes and negative forms of meaning-making are often associated with poorer psychological adjustment (Adler et al., 2016). At the same time, the developmental findings highlight that the relationship between narrative identity and well-being is not uniform throughout the human life (Reese et al., 2017). During early years of adolescence, sophisticated autobiographical reasoning and meaning-making efforts may temporarily coincide with distress, particularly when adolescents are still developing the cognitive and emotional capacities necessary to integrate complex self-relevant experiences (McLean et al., 2010). By late years of adolescence and emerging adulthood, however, narrative processes appear more consistently associated with well-being, especially when individuals construct positive and growth-oriented interpretations of life events.

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